

The loneliness of Achilles

Robin Osborne

The *Iliad* is the story of Achilles' anger. Like all good stories it has a beginning, when Agamemnon makes Achilles angry by taking Briseis from him, a middle (we might debate exactly what constitutes the middle!), and an end. The end comes when Achilles lays his anger aside in book 24 and gives Hector's corpse back to Priam. And although there are many hints in the *Iliad* that the story of the Trojan War is by no means finished with this episode, the end is one where despair is balanced by hope. Achilles has proved himself worthy of Zeus' description of him: 'he is not a senseless, inconsiderate or pitiless man'.

Art versus text

The range of emotions that can easily be shown in the visual arts is rather different from that which can be conveyed by those who work with words. And while anger may be easy to convey in the moving image, Greek artists had few resources for doing so. Even the scenes of Briseis being led away from the tent of Achilles manage to evoke not the beginnings of anger but a sense of loss, loss accompanied rather by resignation than wrath.

Love and loss

Loss, and the loneliness that results from it, dominate the life of Achilles as seen in Greek art. We see this in the much-represented scene of Achilles pursuing and killing Troilos, an episode said to have occurred shortly after the landing at Troy. A relief from a bronze shield band dating to the early sixth century shows Achilles about to drive his sword into a naked Troilos, whom he holds up over an altar. On the altar is a cock, a bird much favoured as a love-gift from men to their boy lovers. This is almost certainly an allusion to a version of the story of Achilles and Troilos which told that Achilles fell in love with Troilos as he fought with him, and that it was Troilos' spurning of Achilles' advances which led Achilles to display extraordinary violence in killing him. Achilles' violence is a direct reflection of the loneliness of the rejected lover. Many artists stress the violence by showing Achilles with Troilos' decapitated head on the end of his spear, or by showing the murder of Troilos in a way exactly parallel to the later murder of Hector's son Astyanax at the hands of Achilles' son Neoptolemos – one of the cruel acts for which Neoptolemos became accursed.

Love and death get involved together in another of Achilles' duels, his duel with the Amazon Penthesileia. In surviving literature it is only texts of a later date that stress that Achilles fell in love with Penthesileia at the moment that he killed her. But can you resist the idea that the painter Exekias uses the direction of Achilles' spear in one of his scenes of this episode to allude to that story by drawing attention to the way in which Achilles' gaze meets that of Penthesileia?

The shadow of death

Every duel in which a warrior is successful foreshadows that final duel in which he will die. But in the case of Achilles the sense of foreshadowing is particularly strong. One of those with whom he is most frequently shown fighting is Memnon. Achilles fought with Memnon after the events recorded in the *Iliad* had happened. When Achilles and Memnon met on the battlefield,

so the story went, Zeus weighed their fates in a balance to see who would live and who die. That weighing is shown in a number of representations, both on vases and in sculpture. The result in this case was that Memnon was to die, but the very weighing of the fates emphasises the fragile hold on life of even the winner on this occasion.

Achilles became, in fact, the archetypal victim of war. For all that he was the greatest of all warriors, his was also the exemplary corpse. Time and again artists showed the great Aias carrying Achilles off the battlefield dead, with Achilles' limp body draped over Aias shoulder. That scene itself casts a shadow over the other famous and much repeated scene of Achilles playing a board game with Aias and winning. Once more whatever the immediate result of the game, which is never mentioned in surviving literature, it is the temporary nature of Achilles' success which is effectively emphasised by that other context in which Achilles and Aias are found together.

Partying alone

You will have noticed that very few of the episodes of Achilles' life favoured in Greek art relate to the *Iliad*. In fact artists in archaic Greece seem only rarely to have been directly inspired by the *Iliad*. But the final scene that I want to discuss is one that is found in Homer: the scene from *Iliad* 24 of the ransom of the body of Hector from Achilles' tent by Priam. When this scene is first shown in Greek art, a standing Achilles is shown greeting the aged Priam, with the corpse of Hector lying at Priam's feet. In the sixth century, however, painters of Athenian black-figure pots developed a new way of showing this scene.

In the sixth-century Athenian representations Achilles is shown reclining on a couch. Hector's corpse generally lies beneath the couch, Priam stands at the end of the couch and the scene may be framed by further figures to right and to left (often including a woman, perhaps Briseis, and Hermes, who escorts Priam and ensures his safety – though in the *Iliad* Hermes does not enter Achilles' tent).

What interests me here is the choice of showing Achilles reclining on a couch. In the *Iliad* Achilles is made up one point to jump up from his chair, but there is no suggestion that he was ever reclining. Scholars have often suspected, in fact, that the habit of reclining to eat and drink came in only towards the end of the seventh century, and that it came in under the influence of practices in the near east. From the end of the seventh century onwards it is quite common for pots, and particularly pots associated with drinking, to show scenes of men (and women) reclining on couches with loaded tables beside them and drinking cups in their hands.

We know quite a lot about symposia, these occasions on which men reclined to drink. Much poetry written for such occasions survives, and it is clear that symposia were dominated by witty exchanges, talk of love (for women or for boys), and attempts to embarrass fellow drinkers. Works under the title Symposium written by Plato and Xenophon survive which give us some idea of how such occasions could turn out (see Christopher Rowe's discussion of Plato's *Symposium* in *Omnibus* 41).

Knifing the symposium

All that we know about the symposium stresses it was a social occasion. On Athenian black-figure pottery down to 530B.C. Achilles is the only 'solo' symposiast ever represented. The idea of a solitary symposium is a contradiction in terms – after all, the word means 'drinking together'. So what is Achilles doing lying there on his own? That question, I suggest, is just the point. When painters show, as they will begin to do towards the end of the sixth century, the god of wine Dionysus as a solo symposiast, they surround him with satyrs and nymphs whose exuberant activities make it plain that Dionysus is at the heart of a merry company. And when the painters of red-figure pottery show solo symposiasts they do so on cups, so that the drinker represented joins the company of the symposiast drinking from the cup. But in these black-figure images Achilles is shown on amphoras, not cups, and his visitors are not like Dionysus' visitors, not such as to encourage him in festivities. What is more, while other symposiasts hold cups, Achilles is often shown holding a knife. It is true that slices of meat that might need cutting up lie on the table next to him, but the way in which he holds the knife turns it into an aggressive weapon: this is not the behaviour one hopes for at a party. But then, this isn't a party. By choosing a way of representing Achilles that reminds the viewer of the symposium but then breaking the 'rules' of symposia, the artists of Athenian black-figure pottery conjure up an image that conveys Achilles' loneliness even more powerfully than the images of his love-lost duels or empty victory in a board game. In doing so they do not illustrate the text of *Iliad* 24, whose words they often contradict, but they produce a visual equivalent whose power to move comes from leaving the viewer poised between hope and despair.

Robin Osborne has spent the last two years thinking about the how and why similar scenes are represented on pots differently at different times. But next month he returns from the lonely life of research to the social joys of teaching as he takes up the Chair of Ancient History at Cambridge.

Readers with access to an *Omnibus* archive might like now to look at Oliver Taplin's article 'Homer the Tragedian' in *Omnibus* 17 (1989), where they will find another scene of Achilles the solo symposiast, this time on a red-figure cup.